

Title: Interview with Darlene Taylor

Date: April 17, 2025

Location: Crisfield City Hall

Interviewer(s): John Golladay and Will Schatz

Interviewee: Darlene Taylor

Introduction: Darlene Taylor, born and raised in Crisfield, moved to D.C. for 20 years and came back in 2005, and became the mayor of Crisfield. She talks about some of her childhood memories with flooding and working in the crab houses. She talks about what the city has planned and is very hopeful for the recovery of Crisfield.

[Transcription begins]

John Golladay (Golladay): Hello, we're- we're here on April the 17th, 2025, here at the Crisfield City Hall. Interviewing today is John Golladay and-

Will Schatz (Schatz): Will Schatz.

Golladay: And we're interviewing the Crisfield City Mayor, Ms.-

Darlene Taylor (Taylor): Darlene Taylor.

Golladay: Alright. So, first things first, how long have you lived here in the Crisfield area?

Taylor: Well, I was born and raised in Crisfield, so I stayed here until I graduated high school, then I went away to college. Then I spent 20 years across the bridge working for a defense contractor and came back home in 2005. So I've been here most of my life.

Golladay: What- what drew you back in here to Crisfield?

Taylor: Well, in reality, when I left, I always knew I'd be back. It was, it's my home. My family was still here. I just loved the- the environment, and so this was always considered home for me, and I decided after 20 years, it was time to come home.

Golladay: What is it that you like about Crisfield?

Taylor: Well, I guess for me I like the people, I like the pace of life, you know, and I just like the fact that, you know, I could feel comfortable that my kids could grow up here safe, you

know, that they would have a- a really good family-oriented childhood. I just liked that even though there's not a lot here in the town to do, we are close by, you know, neighboring towns, where there are things that we could go to do.

Schatz: What are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield?

Taylor: Really, it would be my childhood. It would be growing up. When I grew up here, I- I had an opportunity to work in the seafood industry with my mom, so my mother picked crabs here. Crabs were the biggest thing here. There were like at least 10 or more crab houses that were here, and so that was the industry for the African American culture. So we grew up picking crabs, and I learned to crack claws when I was about nine years old. So I used to go down to the crab houses and we started there, and then, we used to do that a lot. And then I had a lot of friends in the community and we used to just be able to roam around the town freely and, you know, enjoy our- our childhood.

Golladay: Nowadays, how do you entertain yourself around here? What are things you like to do?

Taylor: Well, keep in mind, I am now semi-retired, so I'm not looking for a lot to do. But whenever I'm looking for something to do, there are opportunities here. We have different types of festivals that- that occur here, cultural heritage festivals that are here. We have several art galleries that are always putting on different types of events. We have the city dock, which is a place that we go and you're able to go. Then, you know, we have the restaurants. So, from an entertainment standpoint, what we don't have is like a movie theater or a skating ring or anything like that for the younger people. But, you know, like I said, being semi-retired, for me, if I'm looking for something to do, there's an Elks Lodge, there is an American Legion. There are different places that you can go that are usually putting on some event.

Golladay: So, what role does the waterfront play in community engagement in life around here?

Taylor: Well, it's centered. If you think about it, Crisfield, one particular point, was considered the seafood capital of the world and crab capital of the world, and so we have always been centered around the water, the watermen, the crab pickers. It's a community that we had created. And so it is the basis of our lifestyle. It is the center of, you know, who we are and what we do, and so, the water has such a calming effect. There's no question about it, you know, and it- it helps to keep our community with a- this vibrant feeling of tranquility, you know, even though there may be a lot of other things going on. The water is central to who we are. It's central to our livelihood. It's essential to our recreation. We have like the- the Labor Day kinds of activities that occur there. We have the J. Millard Tawes Crab and Clam Bake, which is really huge community and political kind of event. We have the crab and cruises that occur, so it's part of our lifestyle, it's a part of our heritage. It's one of the reasons that people come here. I say, "Come for

the crabs and stay for the sunset." We have an amazing sunset that you can watch over the water. So the water has become, you know, who we are and we have become a part of that culture.

Schatz: Have you noticed changes in the land, weather, watering, or flooding in Crisfield?

Taylor: Absolutely. The reality of it is there's always been some measure of flooding here in Crisfield. It's just- it's something that we learned to live with, but over the years you can definitely tell that it's happening much more frequently and so we have been struggling to keep up with that and so one of the things that we did was we had an opportunity to work with FEMA to come up with a project, which you can see up on the wall. It's a \$36 million project that was actually slated to help us create a barrier around our town, like a seawall, basically using existing infrastructure. So we understand that flooding has definitely increased and created a lot more hazards for our community, and it puts us in jeopardy that over time, we will not be able to sustain the ability to- to recover from the water and flooding.

Golladay: Are there any like flooding events that you have like vivid, clear memories of?

Taylor: Oh, absolutely. For me, I guess the most vivid one would be Hurricane Sandy, you know, that was the one that truly devastated us. We had to do major evacuations. Our citizens suffered extreme personal damage to property. We were blessed in that there was no loss of life, but there was extreme loss of personal property, and a lot of our citizens were actually displaced. But, you know, out of every tragedy comes something good. And so the Eastern Shore long-term recovery came in at that point. And then they were able to help citizens rebuild, especially citizens who did not have insurance, because in a community like ours, we- we are a seafood community. And so a lot of people, unfortunately, were not able to afford flood insurance, so they didn't have it. And so, then what happens when you lose your home? And so, they were actually rebuilt homes. The Mennonites came in and they did that free of charge for the citizens who were not able to rebuild through insurance means.

Schatz: Do you feel that something is changing in Crisfield with the environment?

Taylor: In terms of sea level rise or in terms?

Schatz: Yeah, like sea level rise, flooding, heavier storms.

Taylor: Yeah, well, yes. We get more frequent worst storms, more flooding than we've ever had before, we're definitely seeing that. And we know that we're impacted because even with our town being where it is, it's been in such serious decline that there have not been maintenance efforts that have kept up with the infrastructure, so the drainage systems are poor. So when you think about a combination of there being more frequent flooding, worse storms, and then not having the ability to drain the water when it does come in, that the impacts are tremendous.

Golladay: What do you, like, personally do to, like prepare for flooding events when they're coming along?

Taylor: Well, what we do is we have a notification system and we have what we call Code Red. We make sure that our citizens are aware of incoming, you know, the- the changes in the weather and the flooding and what they could be. And so then we also provide opportunities in the places that we're able to coordinate with the county and places that they can take their cars that would be out of the- the flood zone. We work with EMS to make sure that if we have to evacuate, that we have a plan in place. So we do as much emergency management as we can, you know, within the city. If we'll do sand, if we think that they need bags of sand to kind of put in front of their businesses or homes or whatever to try to, you know, minimize the damage as much as possible. So we have an entire emergency management plan. Our staff gets together. We figure out, okay, how bad do we think it's going to be? What measures do we need in place? We actually have one of those huge utility trucks in case we have to transport people to and from work. So we work together with along with the county emergency management system to make sure our citizens are safe and that they're aware of what's going on and that we can transport them if needed.

Golladay: How far in advance do you meet?

Taylor: Well, normally, once we hear that there's a pending storm, you know, we'll start meeting that week if we hear that there is a storm that's coming up. So within, you know, within a week to a few days, whenever we know that there going to be a potential major storm, then we- we start planning as early as possible.

Schatz: Have you participated in any community events surrounding the issue of flooding?

Taylor: Numerous ones. So for the past two years we have worked extensively with the climate resilience community. That's how we became part of the FEMA BRIC program and also the Nature Conservancy came into our community and they created a community advisory board and so they met on a regular basis to- to look at the flooding. EPA came in and they are doing Academy- Resilience Academy with the community and they have events, I think like up to six-week kinds of events that they that they host, and then we've been working with them and the Army Corps of Engineers, the- the Department of Natural Resources. All of these agencies have been working with us to help us be in a better position to combat the issues of flooding and- and climate resilience for our community.

Golladay: How has the, like, the local economy, particularly like crabbing, oysters, waterfront businesses, how have they changed over the years?

Taylor: Well, unfortunately, they've dwindled, you know, as the oysters changed and as the oysters are still, you know, pretty- you can get a pretty good catch for oysters here. The crabs, not as much anymore, so what I learned recently was that there are no longer any crab-picking

houses in Crisfield, so they are no longer picking crabs here, so that's it- that's a change to, you know, from where we were to a zero. And- and that really concerned me, because what I realized, it was twofold. It's that we don't have as many crabs anymore, but it's also that we don't have anyone to pick the crabs. So when I was coming up, that was what we did. But I, but at this stage, none of the young people coming through are interested in picking crabs. That is not the job, you know, of choice. It probably wouldn't have been for our ancestors, but it was what was here and what was available. So that has changed, so you don't see as many watermen. There's not as many opportunities at all for- for the businesses. So that's been a big deal for us.

Golladay: Why do you think the- the young people aren't as interested in crabbing and crab picking?

Taylor: Well, I can't speak to the crabbing part of it, although I have heard that there's another generation who is coming up that's kind of interested in being watermen, and that's- I think that's relatively new, because I think that I have read somewhere that that was kind of tapering off as well. But from a crab picking industry, you have to figure out that there is no money in it. I mean, so the younger generation is not interested. When I was coming up, my gosh, a whole gallon, which was five cans of crab meat, you might have got \$5 for it, okay, even though, you know, they were selling one can for \$20. So there's really no money in it, so I can't, it's understandable, and it can be considered hard work. We just happen to be in an environment where the ladies made it feel more like, you know, a family kind of environment. So it didn't feel like hard work, but it's really hard work, and it's a skill that's needed to be able to do that, to be able to survive and make money on picking a small crab.

Schatz: How are businesses doing in Crisfield?

Taylor: Businesses are struggling. There's absolutely no question about that, because think about the fact that we are struggling with a serious decline, you know, and then climate change doesn't happen, doesn't help that and so it's been a deterrent for businesses to come to a place that they know is going to be flooded. So, you know, not a lot of businesses are anxious to come here and think about our location because you- you don't just happen on- on Crisfield, it has to be the places that you're planning to go. If you go by 413, there's no reason for you to make that turn unless you know there's something there. So what we're planning and what we are hoping to do is create a create an experience, a Crisfield experience, whereby people will want to come here. If you keep in mind, we are the gateway to Smith Island, where the steak cake is. And we're- we're the gateway to Smith Island and to Tangier Island. And then we also have our own amenities. We have the marina, we have James Allen State Park, we have the Ward Brothers Workshop, the Tawes Museum. We do have things here, but I don't think that we're really advertising them and marketing them the way to get people here. And that's what businesses need, is foot traffic.

Golladay: Are there any particular projects regarding the flooding or the economy that are super-exciting to you?

Taylor: The most exciting one is the one that we worked on for the past two years. We were selected as the number one application in the nation for the FEMA Building Resilience in Communities Program that was recently canceled by the new administration. \$36 million, taxpayer dollars of the City of Crisfield, that was directed back here so that we could build that seawall around our town. And that was just the southern end. We had just applied for 37 million more dollars to be able to do the northern end of our community. So that was the most exciting project that we had. But the good news is that we're continuing to explore other opportunities for that project, but in the meantime, we're also working with the EPA, and the EPA is helping us to look at nature-based solutions, and so they're helping us and we're looking at opportunities to apply for funding that will slow the water down from coming into Crisfield and the places outside of Crisfield where we see real sea-level rise. There are places where there used to be land formations that would help slow that water down that are now gone, so we're looking at how do we help to restore some of that. And so, there's some projects that we just applied for, one we applied for through NOAA, that would help us to restore some of those land formations and help to slow that down, put reef barriers out, do different things that are more offshore as opposed to the projects. We looked at those as complementary. We were looking at those as offshore projects, and at the same time, we were doing our seawall barrier around the town. So we thought that we were in a really good place, and we're really- we're really excited about the fact that we had that project.

Golladay: What's some of the, what's- what's the timeframe looking like for those nature-based solutions to actually starting to implement them?

Taylor: Well, the reality of it is, we just applied for some funding for that, so we don't even know as a matter of fact, that one application that I was referring to went in yesterday. So it'll- we probably won't even know that for a few months. And then what we learned is that even constructing nature-based solutions takes time. So when we're talking like, I don't know, maybe 18 months to two years or whatever, it takes some time to really get those things off the ground. Because even though you have a concept, once you get the funding, you have to prove that concept. You have to do the actual engineering. You have to meet with people and understand, does this really work the way you expect it to work? And then once you've done that process, then you can start with construction, and then the construction itself could take time. It's the planting, it's the growing, it all of that. So before you see the actual fruits of the labor, it could be up to two years.

Schatz: Do you think the younger generation are less likely to stay in Crisfield?

Taylor: Absolutely. If we- if we're not able to provide them an opportunity for a livelihood, if we're not able provide them recreational opportunities, then they are much less likely to stay

here. But, you know, most of them leave because they're looking for a decent job. And so, we have to be able to have those opportunities here. And so, that's one of the things we're hoping to be able to work towards.

Golladay: Several of the people that we've interviewed so far have talked about the need for like a- a drain maintenance and a ditch maintenance. What's the- what's the city doing in regards to that?

Taylor: Well, we are also working with Eastern Shore Regional GIS. I think they're part of Salisbury University, and they have been really helpful in helping us to get a GIS mapping of our drainage system, which had not been done. And so, in all honesty, when you look at that picture, you see that our town, Crisfield, was really built on a ditch system. But unfortunately, over the years, those ditches have not been maintained. And so, what happens is some people, they might fill them in. You know, other things, they might just, they- they haven't been cleaned out, there may be tide gates on there that are either broken or are no longer even existing, so the draining system itself has not had a lot of attention over the years. And so, one of the things that we did as part of our American Rescue Plan funding was to put funding aside for ditch maintenance. And so, we're all ready, we have a new public works director who's, you know, really active and getting out there and tracing down all these ditches using that Eastern Shore Regional GIS Cooperative Map and being able to see, ground truth, a lot of those ditches as well as we have a local contractor who's helping him to identify places that we can get the most value by- by grading our ditches and- and fixing our tide gates and things like that. So the city is very active in creating a ditch maintenance plan. We had actually worked with FEMA, the BRIC DTA team, to look at how do you fund something like that longer term? We're using our ARPA money to get us in a good place, but then we gotta keep going, and so they are helping us to look at a possible ditch maintenance utility fee or something that might make sense for us to be able to maintain our ditches in the future.

Golladay: Thank you, that's a- that was a great answer. You- you mentioned having children. What's it like raising them in a- in Crisfield?

Taylor: Well, like I mentioned, it is such a tight-knit community that you have a feeling of safety. And so for me, you have to balance things. And so, I spent 20 years in D.C., and what I loved about the city was that there were so many opportunities. But then you also have to be very cautious in in in city living. Here there are not as many opportunities for our kids, but, you know, you have a sense of safety, security, and family. And family values that- that, you know, it's easier to instill. So for me, I- I mean I really enjoyed raising my kids here, because I was raised here, and I enjoyed the fact that I could send them to games, basketball games, or, you know, they could participate in cheerleading sports. There- there- there are a lot of things for them to do, kind of growing up, but not as many, let's say, educational kinds of opportunities that you might see in other places.

Schatz: Are you hopeful for the future of Crisfield?

Taylor: Yes, well, yes, I'm extremely hopeful for the future of Crisfield, because I believe that we will get this funding opportunity. If it doesn't come from the way that we thought it was going to come from, it's going to come because we already have an amazing plan. Keep in mind that I said we were selected as the number one application in the nation for this opportunity and we have gotten so much feedback from other resilience kinds of partners about what it is that we're trying to do and the collaboration and the biggest part is the collaboration with other agencies, so for me, the infrastructure, the flooding, getting that under control, that's the foundation for Crisfield's future. So keep in mind what I said, you know, you come for come for the crabs and stay for the sunset- sunset. So I'm optimistic that we can create a Crisfield experience, the one I just talked about, that will drive people here, and another piece of that is the ferry that has been slated to come to Crisfield. So when Crisfield becomes one of those stops, I won't say if, I'll say when Crisfield becomes one those places, you can take a day trip over here from across the bridge, you know, on a ferry and relax. We just have to have things for them to do there and give you. But we have opportunities here. I'm looking at the fact that we actually have also applied for some what's called Earmarks, congressionally directed spending. And so, we're able to do so many major repairs to our city dock, which is the focal point of our community. So if you haven't been down there, you want to go down there, but that's the focal part point of our community. And so, we were able to take funding to elevate that, because it took a real beating and a lot of the storms. So we have funding earmarked to elevate that, and also the DNR is helping with that funding for the piers. We're going to elevate that, repair all the damage that was done, and also turn it into a venue. So we got a bond bill from one of our senators that will allow us, we've got an architect right now who's looking at giving us three designs. What can that look like? So that will be a major- a major focal point, and it's also the reason that we're on the list for the ferry, because we have the infrastructure already. So all of those things coming together and then we also just- we just work with Tidal Health. We're selling them this part of Main Street. If you come through here, it looks really derelict, right? The reality of it is, we've just sold that to them for a dollar, so they can tear that down, pretty much the Main Street block. And they're going to create a state-of-the-art urgent care type facility. So that'll be a catalyst for our Main Street. So when you say am I hopeful for Crisfield, I am extremely hopeful for Crisfield in a way that we have not been for many, many years.

Golladay: So would you recommend Crisfield as a place to live?

Taylor: Oh, absolutely. There is no other place like Crisfield. This is what I tell people. Crisfield is not just a place, it's a feeling. So you have to come here to experience it. You have to understand that that peace and that tranquility, it definitely does transfer when you come here and you leave the hustle and bustle of the city. And remember, I said I spent 20 years across there. So I- I- I love the fact that there were a lot of opportunities, a lot of things to do, but there was something about coming on this side of the bridge, and coming home to Crisfield, that I

could kind of get away from all of the noise, all of the distractions, all of those things and have that piece of tranquility where I can just walk out of my house, walk down the street, walk around or ride a bicycle or do whatever I wanted to do, and it gave me a carefree kind of a feeling. So I- I've met so many people who tell me, "Yeah I came to visit for whatever and then I bought a house and I've been here for a few years." So it's a common thing. So it's not just me, you know, I tell people all the time, "You come and drink the water, you'll stay." So yes, I would absolutely recommend Crisfield as a place to live.

Schatz: Any wisdom that you would like to share with the future generations?

Taylor: What I say to future generations is what my aunt said to me. So the reason that you see me sitting here today, the reason that I am back here in Crisfield, is what I say to them. So when I was, I don't know, I guess I was just out of my teens, but my aunt who's now deceased said to me one day, I just remember we live not far from here, but we're riding around in a car, and she said to me, she said, "Crisfield is the way it is because so many people took from the community and no one gave back." So what do I say to future generations? I say, this is home, this is the village that raised you, so it will be as good as you make it. So no matter where you go or what you do, remember that Crisfield helped you to become who you are and never forget about Crisfield. So when you're in a position to give back, just always think about Crisfield and the ways that it could benefit from whatever your success happens to be.

Golladay: And then, just as really wrapping up, is there anything that we haven't talked about regarding Crisfield that you really wanted people to know?

Taylor: I think we've covered a lot, so let me say when I think about that, what- what is it that we have not covered? You know, there is so much that we are trying to do. And so, one of the things that I want people to understand is that real and lasting and impactful change does take time, you know, and so, but you have to have a vision, and you also have to have a willing spirit. So sometimes people, if they haven't seen a lot of physical change, then- then they get discouraged. So what I would say is that Crisfield is definitely on the move, we're on the rise. And so, when I talk to people, you can feel that there's a sense of excitement that hasn't been there for some time. So what I say to people is that don't get discouraged if you don't see it happening today or tomorrow. Just know that we have a vision, that we have a plan, that Crisfield does have a future. And that as long as we continue to work together, stay on the same page, and promote the- the important assets that we have in our town, because there are so many of them, then we will get to a place that we once again can thrive the way we did when I grew up. So I'm excited.

Golladay: Alright then I- I- I think that's pretty much all that we have.

Schatz: Yep, thank you. Thank you for interviewing with us.

Taylor: Yeah, sure, yeah, you're absolutely welcome! Yeah, yeah, you did good. It's only 10:24.

Golladay: Oh yeah, we made good time.

Taylor: John and Will, right? Yeah, okay. You're so welcome.

[Transcript ends]